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Opening extract from

The Ashleys: Birthday Vicious

Written by

Melissa de la Cruz

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ASHLEY FINDS OUT WHAT'S BLACK AND WHITE AND GREEN ALL OVER

ASHLEY SPENCER SMOOTHED THE SOFT folds of her Proenza Schouler black-and-white-striped skirt, crossed her spray-tanned, power-yoga-toned legs, and told herself everything was going to be okay. Even though it was exactly a month until her Super-Sweet Thirteen, and her mother was only now getting around to a meeting with the party planner, everything was going to work out just fine.

The planner in question was Mona Mazur, the most chic, imaginative, and—of course—expensive planner on the West Coast; she'd done parties for the children of everyone who was anyone, from the Chadwick triplets (daughters of the famous singing star) to the various adopted multiracial progeny of the movie stars Barton Flick and Organza Belle, not to mention a Super-Duper Seventh in Vegas for a notorious magician's little boy. In other words, Mona was worth waiting for (and Ashley and her mother had been waiting for the better part of an hour already), even if meant doing everything at the last minute.

Another reason Ashley had a good feeling about waiting for Mona: Her office had style oozing out of its davenports. Mona's HQ was a pale green Victorian mansion in Nob Hill, with a terraced French-style front garden and a real gaslight glowing outside the front door. Inside, sitting with her mother on a toile-de-Jouy sofa, Ashley couldn't believe her eyes. Everything, from the floor tiles to the furniture to the silk drapes to the plush sheepskin rug under their feet to the embossed wallpaper, was black and white. Even Mona's dogs, two

miniature poodles named Dorothy and Draper, matched the theme: Dorothy was snowy white, Draper was a glossy black, and both wore houndstooth collars.

Ashley was glad she had changed out of her uniform after a long, hard day—well, a short, ordinary kind of day, really, if she was completely honest—at Miss Gamble's, the exclusive girls' school where she and her cabal, the Ashleys, ruled the polished-wood halls and reigned over the seventh grade.

She'd chosen her new skirt and a plush black cashmere sweater, deciding at the last moment on a pair of Miu Miu jeweled ballerina flats—black satin with large trapezoid
crystals. And now it seemed like fate, or karma, or one of those hippie things that her father liked to muse about after he came back from yet another ashram, that her clothes reflected the party planner's living-room color scheme. It was inevitable: Ashley Spencer and Mona Mazur were going to be a match made in heaven.

"Do you think she's for real?" whispered Matilda, Ashley's mother, when Mona finally welcomed them, click-clacking across the sweeping expanse of black-and-white tiles to fetch one of her parties-of-the-rich-and-fabulous albums to show them what she could do.

Ashley nodded, entranced, twirling a strand of her long golden hair between two fingers. Mona was very glamorous in a fifties-pinup sort of way, her jet-black hair worn in a lacy snood, her pale skin almost translucent. She looked like a femme fatale in a black-and-white movie, the kind of dame who packed a pistol in her crocodile handbag.

"You should wear a snood," Ashley suggested, but Matilda just laughed. What was up with her mother this week?
Like Mona, Matilda was pale, but not in a good way, like a
powdered geisha, but more like she was washed out and drained of color.

Matilda had pulled her long blond hair into a stringy ponytail, and if it hadn't been for Ashley having a fit as they were climbing into their new bronze Porsche Cayenne, her mother would actually be sitting here right now still wearing socks and Birkenstocks.

Luckily, there was a pair of Tod's driving shoes under the front seat, because Matilda said she was too tired to go back in and change. Ashley's mother was one of those beautiful but not vain women who rarely shopped or dressed up. When pressed, Matilda could be counted on to wear something simple but

elegant: beige linen in the summer, butter suede in the winter, and subtle jewelry all year round.

But she usually stuck to a wardrobe that had a ten-year-old expiration date: She was still wearing her J. Crew rugbys from college, and the Birkenstocks were taking it too far. Ashley was afraid Mona Mazur would take one look at the comfortable cork-soled shoes and shut the door in their faces.

"Now," said Mona, tapping back into the room and arranging the black-covered book on the coffee table in front of them. "May I offer you some tea, Mrs. Spencer?"

"That would be great." Matilda tugged at the neck of her cream sweater as though it was strangling her. "I'm not
feeling . . . entirely a hundred percent right now."

"Chamomile, perhaps?" suggested Mona, waving two fingers in the air. Instantly, one of her doe-eyed assistants materialized to receive her orders.

Ashley flicked through the plastic pages of the book, eagerly skimming every picture of Moroccan-style bazaars, fake wintry forests, and re-creations of the Titanic's ballroom. It was great to get ideas from other people's parties, but for her own, Ashley wanted something unique. Something
bigger and better. After all, she was Ashley Spencer—the most envied twelve-year-old girl in San Francisco. This had to be the best Super-Sweet Thirteen party ever.

And she had other reasons for wanting this to be a party nobody in the Bay Area would ever forget. This semester
wasn't going quite as smoothly as Ashley had hoped. At the beginning of the school year, everything was just perfect.
The Ashleys were rocking Miss Gamble's. The Ashleys were the cutest, the best-dressed, the most feared girls in school, and Ashley was queen of the Ashleys. Everyone was so jealous when she snagged Tri Fitzpatrick, the cutest boy in the seventh grade at Gregory Hall, as her first real boyfriend.

But then things started going wrong. Tri never seemed to get around to kissing her, and he eventually told her he
really preferred A.A.—Ashley Alioto, the tallest and sportiest of the Ashleys. Whatever!

Then she'd even let nouveau-riche Lauren Page into the Ashleys, since she could get them on the reality TV show Preteen Queen. But that was another thing that started out in Ashley's favor but suddenly turned sour. Just as she was

ruling the airwaves and scoring all the votes, the network dumped the show. Losing a boyfriend and a reality show in one week would have broken the spirits of most girls her age, but Ashley had managed to make it look as if she hardly even noticed.

Even if she was currently the only one of the Ashleys to not have a boyfriend. Lili was dating Max, the cute guy from her French conversation class; A.A. was dating Hunter, the hot red-headed Gregory Hall goalie, and word had it that Lauren had not one but two boyfriends. Ashley shook her head and slammed the book shut, almost dislodging her mother's teacup. Everyone with a boyfriend but her: How did that happen?

Worst of all was the stupid blog, AshleyRank, that her father's lawyer had managed, at long last, to close down. Some sixth-grade wannabes had been making her life a misery, dropping her ranking from number one to a tragic number four. The most unforgivable offense: The blog had crowned a new queen—Ashley Li (better known as Lili) as the new ruler of the seventh grade.

Okay, so Lili was her best friend, and they were devoted to each other—but c'mon! Lili was a total copycat—always buying a pair of J Brand Love Story denims only after seeing Ashley's, always crushing on boys Ashley had declared adorable, always being the first to admire Ashley's new handbags.

Thank goodness AshleyRank was history, and Ashley hoped that its demise had torpedoed the idea that anyone other than Ashley was numero uno as well. Her party would show them she was at the top of her game. All she needed was a little parental cooperation. And a huge party budget, of course.

Mona Mazur's parties cost more than most weddings.

"You know, sweetie," her mother said with a pained smile, rattling the saucer as she set down her teacup. "I wonder if we could come back another day to do this. I'm just not feeling very well right now."

"Mom!" Ashley whined. "Are you sure? Can you just hold it together for a little longer?" She looked at her mom worriedly. There was clearly something wrong with Matilda, but the thought of a sick parent was too scary to contemplate. Ashley hated whenever her parents fell ill, and she harbored nightmarish scenarios of being a poor, friendless orphan whenever they did.

Plus, her birthday was practically tomorrow, and nothing was planned yet. How would she know which outfits to buy if they hadn't decided on a theme? She squeezed her mother's arm and hoped it would communicate how important this was.

Luckily, Mona seemed to be on her side.

"Unfortunately, there's not much time to pull all this together, Mrs. Spencer," she said. "But we can make it quick, yes? Ashley, have you seen anything in my book that inspires you?"

"Well, yes and no," Ashley began, pausing when she glanced at her mother. Matilda really did look bad. Her forehead looked clammy, and she kept closing her eyes. Oh God. She would be a foster child. Or worse, sent to live with the Spencers' only living relative: batty Aunt Agnes, who lived in Vermont with two hundred sheep and made cheese.

Ashley started rattling off ideas as quickly as they formed in her head in order to shake the scary image of having to live among barn animals. "I was thinking of some kind of international theme. . . ."

"I was thinking of something more age-appropriate," her mother said faintly, as though she was too exhausted to
continue, and she closed her eyes for a moment.

"Like the circus, perhaps?" Mona suggested, her face serene. "I think that would work very nicely with the space as well. You have those lovely cathedral ceilings, perfect for a tightrope. We could have rides and carnival attractions in the yard, fire-eaters on stilts along the entryway . . ."

"A circus?" Ashley was pouting. She didn't want anything too childish. It all sounded like a clowns-tying-balloons party, the kind of thing the Ashleys had always mocked.

"It can be very sophisticated," Mona explained. "Think of Cirque du Soleil."

"Yes." Ashley's mother stood up, shaky on her feet. "Let's move ahead with that. Just send me the plan and the
estimate. . . ."

"That's it?" Ashley blurted. So there was to be no more discussion? She crossed her arms and huffed. First her mother had to be dragged here, and now she was racing out the door before they'd even had a chance to discuss a circus-themed menu, how Ashley was going to make a grand entrance on a Vespa, or how many lions they could fit in the den. Everything was being left to chance. Well, chance and Mona. But planning was half the fun!

“I’m sorry.” Her mother offered a limp hand to Mona. “I just don’t feel very . . . BLEAAGH!”

And with that, Matilda Spencer vomited all over the coffee table, her teacup, and Mona’s famous black book, all over her shoes, and all over the snow-white sheepskin rug.

The place was covered in lime green vomit.

“Omigod!” shrieked Ashley, jumping to her feet. “Mom! Are you okay?” She looked at her mother, stricken with fear and disgust. Nimble Mona had leaped from her stool and avoided getting splattered, but Dorothy the poodle wasn’t so lucky: She’d been prancing past just as her mother started barfing and was now dripping with what looked like a mess of regurgitated peas.

Ashley put a hand on her mother’s elbow, shocked speechless. She hoped it was just food poisoning and not something more serious. Nothing that would mean Ashley would live out the rest of her life having to wear itchy wool sweaters and eat Aunt Agnes’s horrible cooking. Matilda was bent double, one trembling hand holding back her ponytail. Mona looked concerned and just a tiny bit appalled.

Uh-oh. Maybe this was going to be a deal breaker. Maybe Mona didn’t like clients who threw up their lunches all over the black-and-white decor, even if those lunches were organic and prepared by a private chef. Maybe she’d show them the door and badmouth them to all the other party planners in San Francisco.

But even as she was anxious about her mother’s health, Ashley couldn’t help but wonder: What did this mean for her Super-Sweet Thirteen?